Detroit Free Press
SPORTS WEEKEND
FRIDAY, May 10, 1996

MIS: Who needs boost? Unser sees 'great show'

BY STEVE CROWE
Free Press Sports Writer

While practice began this week for the race that has defined his family name, two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser Jr. stopped to smell the roses. At his Albuquerque, N.M., home.

"Well, I tell you, I am getting to see my flowers bloom in Albuquerque for the first time," Unser said.

And Unser — along with the rest of the Troy-based IndyCar series — is about to see Michigan International Speedway in May for the first time.

Al Unser Jr.

The May 26 U.S. 500 is being held in protest of Indy 500 rules favoring the new Indy Racing League, founded by Indianapolis Motor Speedway president Tony George. Both races will be run the same day.

It will be the second straight Indy no-show by Unser, who failed to make last year's race along with Team Penske mate Emerson Fittipaldi.

"Quite honestly, missing the show last year hurt immensely," Unser said. "And really, this year, it's out of my control, and it doesn't hurt near as bad as what we went through last year."

Though Unser is resigned to the split between IndyCar and IRL this year, he's not sure the two-series setup will be long-term.

"The IRL has a series, it's up and running, and how long that lasts I don't think anybody knows," Unser said. "I do know the PPG IndyCar World Series is the most competitive series in the world. I feel we're putting on better shows, for sure, than Formula One.

"We've been a leading series in single-seat, open-wheelers for quite a few years, and I don't see that going away whatsoever."

More privately than otherwise, IndyCar types are predicting dire consequences at Indianapolis with its field full of rookies and older equipment.

"You know, I have faith in USAC as far as their procedures they go through, the tests," Unser said. "It's the same rules I had to pass when I was a rookie back in '83. Again, I wouldn't say that it's going to be unsafe.

"But I guess the thing that would be the difference. I really feel you're going to see — from the pole time to the 33rd-fastest guy — a pretty big spread in the field. That's going to probably create some problems that are really kind of, you know, we don't know what's going to happen.

"So there's an awful lot of them, but as long as they use their heads, they'll be all right."

Through five IndyCar races, Unser enters Michigan second in points with 53 — 20 behind Jimmy Vasser. Scott Pruett, driving for Jackson's Pat Patrick, is third with 49.

The U.S. 500, for which practice begins today and qualifying Saturday, will mark Unser's 14th 500-mile race at MIS. His 1990 Marlboro 500 victory, which averaged 189.727 m.p.h., remains the fastest 500-mile race in motor sports history.

Unser is shy about predicting an MIS pole speed.

"I guess I can answer that the way my father would, and that is that the pole is going to be what the pole's going to be," said Unser, a top-10 finisher in his last seven IndyCar starts at MIS.

"I can tell you it's going to be pretty close to what it was last year, because the engine displacements have not changed, the boost has not changed. They lowered it last year from 45 inches to 40 to try to create some reliability on race day, to get as many finishers as possible.

"At the same time that was accomplished, it made for a great show."

Last July at MIS, Pruett's Lola-Ford Cosworth caught Unser's Penske-Mercedes between turns 3 and 4 of the final lap, then won by .056 of a second. It was the second-closest finish in modern Indy-car history.

The pole was won by Parker Johnstone, whose Reynard-Honda turned a lap at 230.458 m.p.h.

"Drafting at Michigan has come into play more so than ever before," Unser said. "So what you see down racing at the Daytona 500 or Talladega, where drafting is such a big part of the game, has entered more into the U.S. 500 because of the reduction of boost.

"So, no, we're not going to be putting up great big numbers like what happened at Indianapolis," Unser said, referring to IRL rookie Tony Stewart's 237.336-m.p.h. lap Monday.

"But come race day, you're going to see 12, 15, 20 cars on the lead lap. You're going to see them nose to tail, and passing going on like last year. I thought it was a great show."

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/ggcn0004